

“Not to embellish the gallery of some affluent nation”: The Eastlakes, Nationhood, and the Purchase of Italian Art for the National Gallery, London

Claire Thomas

“The fortunate necessity of travelling in quest of pictures was the best restorative for mind and body, after the fatigues of a London official life. Year after year the happy tour was made, always to Italy...”
(Lady Eastlake, *Memoir* 191).

“[P]ictures we have seen are now threatened with destruction. But this, the calamity of Italy, may be England’s opportunity. We have wealth and power, and we must be ready to save and seize the treasures offered for our use. We must wait, ever eager on our watch”
(Joseph Beavington Atkinson, *The Fresco-Paintings of Italy* 471).

The legacy of Sir Charles Lock Eastlake (1793 – 1865) as Director of the National Gallery, London, is dominated by his success in acquiring paintings. While other periods in the Gallery’s history were focused, for example, on strengthening patronage, developing buildings or implementing formal policies, Eastlake’s era is defined by his collection building: particularly his purchases of Italian Renaissance art.¹ Eastlake, artist and President of the Royal Academy, was made the first director of the National Gallery in 1855 after working as its Keeper for many years. He remained in the post of director until his death in Pisa in 1865. His wife, Lady Eastlake, *née* Elizabeth Rigby (1809 – 93), accompanied him on buying trips to Italy each year throughout his tenure (Fraser, *Victorians* 51).

Utilising recent publications of the Eastlakes’ personal notebooks and letters (Avery-Quash; Avery-Quash and Sheldon; Sheldon), alongside additional archival work, this essay seeks to collate and interpret previously disparate material. In particular, I have identified some exemplary purchases of Italian paintings, presented here as coherent and nuanced accounts of acquisition during Eastlake’s tenure. At all times, the influence and insight of Lady Eastlake is acknowledged as fundamental to a purchasing process defined by stealth, persistence and careful decision-making. This discussion is underpinned by my interpretation of Sir Charles and Lady Eastlake as embodiments of Victorian cultural values, whereby the enthusiastic purchase of Italian art can operate metaphorically for larger questions of nation building and cultural status.

The Eastlakes Acquiring Abroad

Changes to the National Gallery’s constitution at the start of Eastlake’s directorship meant that he had a generous annual purchase grant that allowed him to “acquire a phenomenal series of works in a very short time” (Conlin 76). Indeed, there appears to be agreement regarding the extraordinary nature of both the quality and quantity of the artworks acquired during his tenure. Lady Eastlake’s memoir about her husband, published soon after his death, notes that while the strains of annual buying tours to

Europe “may have shortened his life,” it is important to recognise “how greatly they contributed to the National Gallery,” citing over 130 purchases (191-92). A 1911 encyclopaedia entry on Eastlake characterises his tenure entirely in terms of the acquisitions made: “[during] his directorship he purchased for the gallery 155 pictures, mostly of the Italian schools” (Rossetti 835). In 1965, to commemorate the centenary of Eastlake’s death, the National Gallery rather whimsically placed “a golden rosette beside each picture acquired during his time” (Herrmann 309); the Gallery’s walls must have resembled a veritable meadow of yellow flowers. The only major biography dedicated to Eastlake emphasises the indefatigable nature of his acquisitiveness, detailing the purchasing deals he was finalising on his deathbed in Pisa (Robertson 233). And in 2011, the brief promotional outline of the exhibition, *Art for the Nation: Sir Charles Eastlake at the National Gallery*, highlighted, once again, the acquisitive aspect of his legacy and “his purchase of an astonishing 139 masterpieces” (National Gallery, *Art for the Nation*).²

One early history of the National Gallery is effusive in its assertion of Lady Eastlake’s role in building the collection, noting the huge improvement in Eastlake’s purchases after his marriage (Ames 126), while a later art historian writes that “[Eastlake] and his wife, with their remarkable *expertise*, mobility, and knowledge of private sources, worked as one to build up what was already an important gallery” (Sheldon 11). Jonathan Conlin’s recent history of the National Gallery reaffirms this, suggesting that Lady Eastlake “possessed a knowledge of the history of art as least as great as her husband” [*sic*] (280). Lady Eastlake’s accounts of their purchasing trips to Italy reveal her pivotal role, and the history of her husband’s career as director should include her activities as art historian and travel writer.

As a young woman, Elizabeth Rigby lived for periods with her family in Norwich, Edinburgh and Heidelberg, Germany. She later travelled to Switzerland and Russia, with an extended stay in Estonia where two of her sisters lived with their Balto-German baron husbands. Her travel memoir of that time, *A Residence on the Shores of the Baltic* (1841) was published by John Murray, marking the beginning of their long association. She became a regular contributor to the *Quarterly Review*, “that Tory journal not noted for its hospitality to women writers” (Ernstrom 471), most famously reviewing Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and John Ruskin’s *Modern Painters*, and analysing the developing art of photography. Her marriage at the age of thirty-nine to Charles Eastlake reinforced her existing interests. For example, the Italian purchasing trips for the National Gallery enabled her to meet the influential art historian, Giovanni Morelli, whose ideas on connoisseurship permeated her own work (Fraser, *Women* 24). After her husband’s death, she revised and updated the translation of Kugler’s *Handbook of Painting: the Italian Schools*, enduring a long battle with John Murray to gain credit for the work and ensure her husband was not named posthumously as the editor (Avery-Quash 90-92). In a letter to John Murray from 1874, Lady Eastlake assertively states her case:

It is plainly impracticable to connect the name of the One, long passed from this scene, as editor to the work of the present year...there can be no doubt that my name is, in every sense, the right one for this work, and that it also would increase its mercantile value. (Letter to John Murray 396)

Lady Eastlake's writing, both before and after her marriage, did much to support the growing recognition of early Italian Renaissance art in Britain (Fraser, *Victorians* 92; Hoch 56).

Acquiring for the Nation: Eligibility, Stealth and Two Veroneses

Sir Charles and Lady Eastlake travelled according to the terms stipulated in government legislation that was drawn up with the reconstitution of the National Gallery in 1855 (Taylor 62). Susanna Avery-Quash suggests that the key purpose of their annual trips abroad "was to secure noteworthy pictures for Trafalgar Square" (15). The Gallery's remit was to "become a repository of examples of the best works of all schools and periods," with early Italian Renaissance painting identified as a particular focus for acquisition (Avery-Quash 16). As well as the work needing to fit within the art-historical story told by the institution, a painting also had to meet stringent eligibility criteria before it could become a part of the Gallery's collection, including standards of rarity, quality, beauty, decorum, condition and significance. But according to Avery-Quash, if Eastlake had trouble convincing the Gallery's Trustees of the worth of an artwork, "his trump card was to argue for the untold advantage and boost to national pride to be gained from successfully...outshining his European rivals" (17). Eastlake's mode of persuasion used to acquire Paolo Veronese's *Family of Darius Before Alexander* of 1565-67 – his most expensive purchase while Director – exemplifies this notion. In a letter to the Trustees, he writes:

I observe that Paul Veronese is still far from being adequately represented in the National Gallery. There are now three specimens in the collection: in the Dresden Gallery there are fourteen pictures by Paul Veronese, several of which are of large dimensions; in the Munich Gallery there are eight; in the Louvre twelve, in the Gallery of Venice...fifteen...in the Berlin Gallery, twelve; in the gallery of the Uffizi in Florence, nine; and so on...I am of the opinion that a considerable addition to the specimens by him already in the Gallery would be admirable. (Avery-Quash 104)

This staunchly pragmatic appeal was a success.

From the earliest inception of the Gallery, national pride was a key component in its development. After the Napoleonic Wars, the institution was established partly as a monument to military victories (Conlin 51); according to an 1824 budget speech made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Frederick Robinson, there was to be an emphasis on providing "a splendid gallery of works of art, worthy of the nation" (Conlin 52). British artists were to be able to learn from, and copy, the masterpieces on display in their own capital city. In identifying, locating and purchasing exemplary artworks for Britain, Eastlake was very conscious of his international competitors. As Avery-Quash and Sheldon explain, "securing a painting for the nation was a delicate and complicated matter to be handled with a firm but diplomatic touch. One of [his] first considerations was the removal of potential rivals from the field, including the Directors of other major art galleries...across Europe" (156). Indeed, deals were occasionally hastened precisely to ensure an acquisition could be kept from another interested party.

In a letter to her friend, the historian Rawdon Brown, Lady Eastlake writes that:

...a magnificent Paul Veronese originally from the Church of S. Silvestro in Venice destined for Paris has been adroitly turned in the direction of London – was stretched and seen in our front drawing room for the first time...and wooed, married and [all] in the course of a few hours. (Letter to Rawdon Brown 175)

The competitive nature of the acquisition is made explicit by the emphasis on the painting's destination; there is a sense that the artwork was about to take a wrong turn, were it not for the people of the National Gallery steering it back onto its rightful path. Minutes of the Gallery's board meeting declare that it was already packed for transport to the formidable opponent, Baron James de Rothschild in Paris (Penny *et al* 54). Strategic negotiation is further implied in Lady Eastlake's use of "adroitly," while the urgency of the transaction is emphasised by the rapid courtship that takes place as a "drawing room" seduction scene during which the anthropomorphised painting is intimately exposed, and secured.

The purchase of this painting, *The Adoration of the Kings* (1573), like many of the Gallery's acquisitions, attracted criticism. Ironically, given Lady Eastlake's satisfaction at her country's seizure of the artwork from the French, some of the criticism was nationalistic in tone. An unattributed article in the *Times* deems the painting to be "not only very inferior to the principal works of the same master in Venice, Genoa, Turin and the Louvre, but it is generally deemed a comparatively vulgar production" ("The National Gallery" 12). The article goes on to question the art-historical reputation of Veronese, suggesting he did not hold the highest status in his own time. The writer draws a parallel with contemporary England to make this point: "In London P. Veronese would have painted our city entertainments at the Mansion-house and the halls of our city companies, but he might not have been selected for Buckingham Palace or Windsor Castle, or for Royal portraits" ("The National Gallery" 12). A contemporaneous letter to the *Times* from William Coningham reflects a similar sensibility, invoking the nation in its negative critique of the Veronese purchase. Coningham forcefully suggests that to "expend money upon so worthless a picture is not only a gross misapplication of the public funds, but it is also calculated to bring the nation into contempt, as establishing presumptively that works of the lowest type are the most congenial to us" (10). Coningham, along with Lord Elcho, John Morris Moore, and others, constituted a group of politicians and art aficionados consistently critical of Eastlake throughout his association with the National Gallery. While a thorough analysis of this situation is not possible here, Avery-Quash and Sheldon suggest that their opposition was related to the appointment of Otto Mündler as Eastlake's travelling agent, which in addition to German-born Prince Albert's support of Eastlake strengthened "a prevailing fear of a German takeover of national institutions" (176).

The Italian art historian, Donata Levi, is unequivocal regarding the national interest that was motivating much of the art acquisition in mid-nineteenth-century Italy. In critiquing the practices of large-scale British institutions, particularly the National Gallery, she recognises the "patriotic wish to thwart the appetites of rival nations, such as France and Russia" (36). In contrast, however, she also asserts that "Curators of public collections did not fail to collaborate, especially when working in Italy. They constantly exchanged intelligence about the situation" (36). The use of "intelligence" here creates the impression of a unified, militaristic assault on

vulnerable Risorgimento Italy or, at least, it gives art market negotiations the status of state secrets. Certainly, there were some almost espionage-like tactics utilised by the Eastlakes to avoid detection. In a letter of 1865 to the writer and politician Austen Henry Layard, Lady Eastlake seeks advice on her husband's behalf regarding a potential purchase. The stealthy nature of the process is apparent:

Sir Chas begs me to write to you on some picture business in Rome...I must premise it by saying that it is a great secret...He would wish you, if you have time, to examine the picture. For this purpose you must apply to Minghetti the Dealer...telling him that Sir Chas has communicated [the] fact of proposed possible sale in that expedience to you & that he greatly desire that you shd [*sic*] see the collection. Minghetti is so very earnest for secrecy that you will have to make the most of Sir Chas' injunction to that effect. (Letter to A. H. Layard 1865 233)

Similarly, in an earlier letter to Layard, Lady Eastlake tells him about a recent purchase in Rome, only to assert the secrecy of the news: "all this *entre nous*" (Letter to A. H. Layard 1858 187). Eastlake's correspondence to staff at the National Gallery in London was occasionally addressed to their domestic residence, lest the institution's name on the envelope excite curiosity among his rivals in Italy (Avery-Quash 32). Likewise, Eastlake did not present a business card during his meetings with sellers. He also persuaded his travelling agent, Otto Mündler, to cease doing so, in case their institutional affiliation attracted attention and raised prices (Avery-Quash and Sheldon 155).

The National Gallery, in its quest to secure art worthy of the British nation, was seeking to acquire paintings from the emerging Italian nation. Indeed, Levi asserts that the number of successful purchases made by the Gallery "was favoured by the uncertainty of the Italian political situation on the eve of and immediately after Unification" in 1861 (33). Throughout his directorship, Eastlake had to negotiate the occasionally conflicting laws of local governments, changing authorities and the vacillating sense of pride in Renaissance art among the region's own people. At times, as Levi contends, the instability of the country expedited acquisitions; at other times, it prolonged or prevented the process (33). One particular attempted purchase exemplifies many of these issues.

The "Missed" Ghirlandaio: Competing National Interests

During his first year as Director, Eastlake assessed a work by Ghirlandaio, *Virgin and Child* (1486), hanging in the cloister of La Calza in Florence. He concluded that it met all the stringent criteria for inclusion in the National Gallery's collection. Its position in a Tuscan church had subjected the painting to a complex legislative history. In 1818, after the Napoleonic Wars, when "speculators with ready money were roving Tuscany in search of bargains," a local decree had been passed prohibiting "the alienation of art objects" from church properties (Robertson 146). However, a papal dispensation allowing the sale of the Ghirlandaio had recently been obtained, and the painting was considered to be on the market. From the outset, it is easy to see how the sale could become complicated. Lady Eastlake explained the initial transaction:

It is a picture in a church belonging to the priests and congregation. The offer made by my husband was most liberal, and the treaty was carried on between

him and the venerable '*Signor Canonico Penitenziere*' – a magnificent old man – in the most courteous way. The offer was accepted, and the *Canonico* obtained the consent of the *Congregazione*, and the Archbishop, the more readily because the money was to be devoted to a charitable institution. (Smith 73)

It is interesting to note that the church community considered money for charity to be reasonable compensation for the loss of their altarpiece. Final approval for an export licence from the Tuscan government was needed for the painting to be sent to Britain. Rather than this proving to be a mere formality, as hoped, the President of the Accademia delle Belle Arti advised the government against the sale, declaring that:

Alienation should be prevented... To sell precious works of art into exile contravened the intentions of pious benefactors who desired to enrich Tuscan churches – not to embellish '*la casa di qualche ricco protestante, o le gallerie di qualche opulenta nazione.*'³ (Robertson 147)

Lady Eastlake was shocked by the decision, writing that “the *Canonico* and the *Congregazione* [were] thrown into despair” (Smith 74). In the above declaration, the President of the Accademia delle Belle Arti is appealing both to a sense of local pride in the history and art of the region, and expressing the idea of Tuscany as a financial underdog in competition with “some affluent nation.” The tenor of this appeal was consistent with the growing patriotism in Risorgimento Italy at that time. Despite the intervention of various British Lords and diplomats, the export licence was refused and the Ghirlandaio *Virgin and Child* was bought instead by the Tuscan government for a third of the price offered by the National Gallery; it is now in the collection of the Uffizi in Florence, having never been “exiled” or “alienated” to a different country.

Donata Levi identifies the Ghirlandaio case as inherent to the beginning of a change in both Italian and British attitudes to the purchasing of Renaissance art. Levi writes, “some kind of justification was needed for the removal of artworks in a period when positive feeling towards the Italian Unification was increasingly widespread in Great Britain and when sympathy for the Italian Liberal party, favourable to the protection of local heritage, was growing” (39-40). It was in this climate that the Eastlakes argued for the well-being of the art, criticising the Italians for neglecting their own heritage.

Lady Eastlake demonstrates contempt for the local treatment of Renaissance paintings after the failed purchase of the Ghirlandaio:

They are so shamefully indifferent here about the preservation of their works of art, that the most glorious things are allowed to perish from sheer contempt and ill-treatment. It would wring the commonest artistic heart to see the most precious specimens of their best time dying a lingering death in their filthy churches – all defiled and bespattered, stuck through with hundreds of nails and even of pins, with the dust and drought of centuries upon them. (Smith 73-75)

The intensely dramatic language here brings to mind the Crucifixion – an act of betrayal has occurred against a figure of purity and goodness; the concerned English

lady, wringing her hands at the deplorable injustice of the situation, is reminiscent of a grieving saint at the foot of the cross. In a somewhat less dramatic letter from the following year, Lady Eastlake repeats her concerns about the situation in Italy: “We saw precious things perished and perishing, which the government won’t save themselves and yet won’t allow others to rescue” (Letter to John Scandrett Harford 176).

Certainly, the motivation here has shifted from acquiring art for the good of the nation, to acquiring art for the good of the art. This idea – an almost missionary-like zeal for the protection of the Old Masters – is a recurring element in the Eastlake papers, reflecting a common attitude held in Britain at that time. Since as early as 1847 – when Ruskin declared in a letter to the *Times* that he was accustomed “to look at England as the refuge of the pictorial,” after having seen, for example, “in Florence Angelico’s highest inspiration rotted and seared into fragments of old wood, burnt into blisters, or blotted into glutinous maps of mildew” (5) – there was a sense that the British were particularly adept at ensuring the longevity and protection of works of art. As Maria Frawley observes, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a “significant part of the appeal of the museum [in Britain] rested with its status as the preeminent place in which the culture of abroad was brought *home* for safekeeping” [emphasis added] (76). So fundamentally had British travellers to Italy acculturated themselves to the visited place, they saw fit to claim a superior knowledge of, and connection to, its art.

The activities of the Arundel Society (for Promoting the Knowledge of Art) can be viewed in this light. Founded in 1848, its members, including Austen Henry Layard and John Ruskin, sought to preserve Italian Renaissance art – particularly frescoes – for the education and edification of the English public (Cooper 163). Rather than purchasing and transporting the pictures to London from Italy, the Arundel Society commissioned on-site copies of (relatively un-transportable) frescoes for subsequent publication as chromolithographs:

The un-travelled Englishman can become acquainted with these master productions only through the intervention of copies; and hence the special and important service which the Arundel Society seeks to confer upon the general public. Its operations may thus be viewed as auxiliary to the general intent of the National Gallery... What the directors of the National Collection have accomplished upon the walls of the Gallery itself, the Council of the Arundel Society will attempt for the portfolio of their subscribers... The dissemination of such productions may be deemed an important, if not, indeed, essential part of that general education, that extension of cultured taste which has for some years been among the most happy results of the art revival in this country. (Atkinson 470)

Alongside the intended cultural education provided to the recipients of its publications, the Arundel Society was also motivated to protect vulnerable works of Italian art from the apparent neglect of the Italians. Writing in 1860, a member of the Society expressed a sense of urgency regarding the extent of decay of many Renaissance frescoes: “It becomes a serious question what measures should be taken to preserve for our use these great works of which it would appear Italy herself is no longer worthy” (Atkinson 465). Despite the different measures taken by the Arundel Society and the National Gallery, the Society’s recognition of the value of Italian art,

alongside the disparagement of the Italian nation, is pertinent here. There is a sense that the Italians, in failing to be adequate caretakers for their nation's heritage, have relinquished the right to possess it. The English solution – to become self-appointed caretakers, the “guardian and protector of the art-treasures of Italy” (Atkinson 464) – is apparent throughout this era, including in the National Gallery's purchasing activities: artworks were taken from their original “home,” and safely “repatriated” in London.

In England, opponents of the Eastlakes occasionally expressed concern for the cultural survival of the newly allied Italy, while in Italy itself, legislative changes were underway. In an attempt to manage the loss of Renaissance art, an inventory was compiled of the paintings remaining in central Italy; this process was partly a response to the activities of a certain signor “Isley...easily identified [as] the director of the National Gallery” (Levi 41-42). So successful was Eastlake in acquiring large portions of Italian culture for “repatriation” in Britain, export laws were tightened to disrupt his progress (Avery-Quash and Sheldon 157-58). One of the men given the task of compiling the inventory of remaining paintings, and a key advocate for the retention of Italian art in Italy, was Giovanni Morelli, who went on to become Lady Eastlake's friend, and a sales agent for the National Gallery.

Fra Angelico: Lost and Found

Occasionally, a purchased artwork failed to make it “home” to England for reasons beyond the administrative or political. In a letter from 1860, Lady Eastlake recounts one such incident:

Our beautiful Fra Angelico (‘The Last Judgement’) an exquisite gem by the rarest master in the world, has gone where so many treasures lie – to the bottom of the sea! It was coming in a steamer, the ‘Black Prince’, from Genoa to England. The vessel collided with another...no lives were lost, but all cargo...I am afraid to speak of it to my husband, who feels the loss acutely. It was insured for 500*l*, exactly what it cost...but money can't compensate. We try to be thankful that no one went down with it. The picture would have been the pride of the collection. (Smith 157)

This excerpt offers an acute account of the cultural weight bestowed on a single artwork. The failure of the painting to reach its intended destination – its failure to be completely acquired – serves to heighten its value. The painting's rarity and exquisite beauty is exacerbated by its loss; it is more determinedly a “treasure” precisely because it resides at the bottom of the sea. No longer present at its point of origin in Italy, and not yet expatriated to a new home in Britain, it remains in an enchanted non-place. Similarly, its projected status as the “pride of the collection” remains untested because of its loss. Lady Eastlake writes that when they first saw the picture, “[my] husband was miserable about it, he admired it so much, and yet it was so ruined,” before they had it assessed by their favoured restorer, Giuseppe Molteni (Smith 99). She writes that Molteni said “we might not meet with another pure Fra Angelico for three hundred years. The upshot is, that it is now in Molteni's custody who promises to do his best, but says, ‘Fra Angelico was an angel, I am but a man’” (Smith 100).

Perhaps if *The Last Judgement* had made it to England its compromised condition and restoration may have exposed it as a poor quality picture. In support of this speculation, it is interesting to note that the Eastlakes never considered the painting to be eligible for the National Gallery collection. Lady Eastlake's account of the couple's first viewing of the picture is decisive on this point: "the National Gallery would not have it" (Smith 99). Accordingly, it was only intended to be a part of their personal collection, like those artworks labelled with a small "F.s." in Eastlake's travel notebooks, indicating their potential placement at Fitzroy Square where the Eastlakes lived in London rather than those labelled "T.s." for the institution at Trafalgar Square (Avery-Quash 19). Clearly, the "treasure" lost off the Genoese coast did not meet the high standards of the nation. This did not, of course, prevent its loss being keenly felt by the Eastlakes; three years later, Lady Eastlake refers in a letter to her recent study of various representations of the Last Judgement – perhaps for her forthcoming essay on Christian art for the *Quarterly Review* – and the fact that as she "pored over the engravings...the tears have trickled down my cheeks" (Letter to Mrs Acton Tindal 217).⁴

The lost Fra Angelico had been purchased by the Eastlakes in Milan in 1858, only to undergo a slow restoration process there prior to its attempted transfer to London in 1860. Despite the restorer's prediction that they would have to wait several hundred years for a comparable work, the purchase of another – superior – Fra Angelico had actually been completed for the National Gallery in October 1860, just prior to the sinking of the *Black Prince*. In her compilation of Lady Eastlake's letters, editor Julie Sheldon mistakenly conflates the two Fra Angelico artworks. In a letter to Austen Henry Layard of September 24, 1860, Lady Eastlake says of her husband: "Today he is alright, & has gone to see his beautiful Fra Angelico at Molteni's, which enchants me" (Letter to A. H. Layard 1860 201). An explanatory footnote states that she is referring to the National Gallery's *Christ Glorified in the Court of Heaven* (c.1423-24) (Sheldon 202). But that painting was to be purchased a month later, in Rome.

Unlike the lost *Last Judgement*, the other work by Fra Angelico, *Christ Glorified in the Court of Heaven*, and its associated panels, was deemed worthy for inclusion in the nation's collection. In his annual letter to the Gallery's Trustees regarding his foreign travels, Eastlake describes his first access to the paintings:

When in Rome on a former occasion I had attempted in vain to see the Fra Angelicos, five in number, in the house of the banker Valentini. This time I saw them. The proprietor allowed me to unhang & examine them as I pleased. I asked if he would part with them; he immediately said he was willing to do so & that his price was £20,000. They were formerly the predella of an altarpiece at Fiesole & are mentioned in the new (Le Monnier) edition of Vasari. I need hardly say that they are first rate specimens. They are also in excellent preservation. (Avery-Quash 116)

This account clearly expresses the eligibility of the works. Their condition and quality are apparent, while their inclusion in Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* – the definitive, and first major text on Renaissance art practice – contributes to their art historical significance. Their origin is also clear; they were executed by Fra Angelico in the early fifteenth century as a predella (lower section) of the altarpiece of his own friary, San Domenico, in Fiesole, outside Florence (Gordon *et al* 4). Their purchase for the Gallery seems assured. Despite this, the acquisition remained un-finalised for another

two years. Initially, the price had been exorbitant, somewhat of an ambit claim by an heir to the collection (Robertson 192-93). When the asking price for the predella was lowered to less than a fifth of the original price, further complications arose regarding export duty. In Eastlake's annual letter to the Trustees of 1860, he describes the efforts undertaken to secure a reasonable charge: "a petition has been presented to the Pope praying the valuation of the Government appraiser...should be adhered to. His Holiness referred the question to the Minister of Fine Arts, & it remains to be seen what the final decision will be" (Avery-Quash 124). The final decision was favourable; the predella was acquired by the National Gallery later that year and within months placed on view in London (Gordon *et al* 7).

By the close of the nineteenth century, different components of the fifteenth-century Fiesole altarpiece by Fra Angelico could be found all over the world, including in France (in the Louvre and other collections in Chantilly and Marseille), Russia (the Hermitage, St Petersburg), the United States (private collection, now in the Metropolitan, New York) and Britain (at the National Gallery and private collections) (Gordon *et al* 5-6). In each location, in each new context, the expatriated fragment of the artwork is defined and known according to its point of origin in San Domenico, Fiesole: the details of its provenance are intrinsic to its status. This phenomenon, as Susan Stewart recognises, is a defining quality of both the cultural souvenir and collected objects such as paintings in a gallery. She writes:

[The] capacity of objects to serve as traces of authentic experience is, in fact, exemplified by the souvenir...Like the collection, [the souvenir] always displays the romance of the contraband, for its scandal is its removal from its 'natural' location. Yet it is only by means of its material relation to that location that it acquires its value. (Stewart 135)

So, while the art has been taken from its country by other nations, it is precisely its connection to the original place that ensures its value to the foreign galleries.

Italy in Trafalgar Square

By the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the National Gallery's Italian collection was comprehensive and renowned. In *A Popular Handbook to the National Gallery* of 1888, Ruskin suggests that "the thoughtful scholars of any foreign country ought now to become pilgrims to the Dome – (such as it is) – of Trafalgar Square" (Cook vii). More than thirty years prior, Lady Eastlake had invoked the pilgrimage metaphor inspired by the world's great galleries. In an unpublished letter to John Murray from 1852, she writes: "we are reminded at every fresh halt how richly it answers to a city to possess a gallery. These are the shrines nowadays which bring the stranger from afar" (Letter to John Murray III).

The compiler of the 1888 handbook turns to Ruskin to delineate the Gallery's development:

"For the purposes of the general student, the National Gallery is now," says Ruskin, "without question the most important collection of paintings in Europe." Forty years ago Mr Ruskin said of the same Gallery that it was "an European jest [*sic*]." The growth of the Gallery from jest to glory may be

traced in the final index to this book, where the pictures are enumerated in order of their acquisition. (Cook xiii)

Eastlake's acquisitive success was obviously fundamental to this status. The Eastlakes' recent biographers write that "on [Eastlake's] death the prominent artists G.F. Watts and W.P. Firth declared that the collections of the National Gallery were so good that it was no longer essential for a young artist to go to Italy" (Avery-Quash and Sheldon 180). Similarly, John Pemble suggests that the "galleries of Rome lost their unique attraction...a visit to Italy was no longer indispensable" (82).

The attitude reflected in these claims offers a pertinent example of the paradox of cultural acquisition. By appreciating Italian art and acquiring Italian art, the Eastlakes apparently negated the need for the British to visit Italy. The Renaissance paintings in Trafalgar Square were successfully expatriated to Britain where they continue to reside in a microcosm of their original country, presumably safe from the ravages they faced prior to purchase. Through their display, the paintings provide not only the intended artistic education for the Gallery's visitors, but also a reminder of the competitive national pride that operated during their acquisition from Italy in the nineteenth century. This essay has presented detailed accounts of some exemplary acquisitions made – or thwarted – during the tenure of Sir Charles Eastlake as Director of the National Gallery, emphasising the role of Lady Eastlake, and the ways in which they negotiated social and practical barriers to acquisition. The Eastlakes have been interpreted throughout as embodiments of Victorian cultural values, whereby the purchasing of Italian art operates metaphorically for larger notions of cultural superiority and possession.

Notes

¹ For the history of the National Gallery, see, for example, Holmes and Baker; Whitehead; Conlin, as well as Anna Jameson in Siegel for a detailed account of the early years.

² It is interesting to note that in the hyperbole of marketing, the purchases made by Eastlake are no longer simply paintings, but "masterpieces;" it is unclear whether it is the quantity or quality of these "masterpieces" that is "astonishing."

³ My translation is "the house of some rich Protestant, or the gallery of some affluent nation." Parliamentary records 1855 in Uffizi Gallery archive, quoted Robertson 147.

⁴⁴ Sheldon offers no explanation for Lady Eastlake's weeping, or the outcome of her study. These connections are my own speculation. The article I think she might be preparing is "Christian Art" (Eastlake and Grote).

Works Cited

- Ames, Winslow. *Prince Albert and Victorian Taste*. London: Chapman & Hall, 1967.
- Atkinson, Joseph Beavington. "Fresco-Paintings of Italy – the Arundel Society." *Blackwood's Magazine* 88 (Oct. 1860): 458-72.
- Avery-Quash, Susanna, ed. *The Travel Notebooks of Sir Charles Eastlake*. Vol. 73. The Walpole Society, 2011.
- Avery-Quash, Susanna and Julie Sheldon. *Art for the Nation: the Eastlakes and the Victorian Art World*. London: National Gallery, 2011.
- Coningham, William. Letter to the Editor. *Times*, 27 Feb. 1856: 10.
- Conlin, Jonathan. *The Nation's Mantelpiece: a History of the National Gallery*. London: Pallas Athene, 2006.
- Cook, Edward T. *A Popular Handbook to the National Gallery Including, by Special Permission, Notes Collected from the Works of Mr Ruskin*. London: Macmillan, 1888.
- Cooper, Robyn. "The Popularization of Renaissance Art in Victorian England: The Arundel Society." *Art History* 1.3 (1978): 263-92.
- Eastlake, Sir Charles Lock. *Contributions to the Literature of Fine Arts, with a Memoir Compiled by Lady Eastlake*. London: John Murray, 1870.
- Eastlake, Elizabeth. Letter to A. H. Layard. 20 Oct. 1858. Sheldon 186-87.
- . Letter to A. H. Layard. 24 Sept. 1860. Sheldon 201-02.
- . Letter to A. H. Layard. 22 Nov. 1865. Sheldon 233-34.
- . Letter to John Murray III. 4 Sept. 1852. MS.42174, John Murray Archive, Nat Library of Scotland.
- . Letter to John Murray. 22 June 1874. Sheldon 396.
- . Letter to John Scandrett Harford. 2 Jan. 1856. Sheldon 176.
- . Letter to Mrs Acton Tindal. 7 Jan. 1865. Sheldon 216-18.
- . Letter to Rawdon Brown. 23 Nov. 1855. Sheldon 174-75.
- . "Modern Painters." *Quarterly Review* 98 (March 1856): 384-433.
- . "Photography." *Quarterly Review* 101 (Apr. 1857): 442-68.
- . *A Residence on the Shores of the Baltic*. London: John Murray, 1841.
- . "Vanity Fair and Jane Eyre." *Quarterly Review* 84 (Dec. 1848): 153-85.

- Eastlake, Elizabeth, and Harriet Grote. "Christian Art." *Quarterly Review* 116 (July 1864): 147-79.
- Ernststrom, Adele M. "'Equally Lenders and Borrowers in Turn:' the Working and Married Lives of the Eastlakes." *Art History* 15. 4 (1992): 470-85.
- Fraser, Hilary. *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.
- . *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014.
- Frawley, Maria H. *A Wider Range: Travel Writing by Women in Victorian England*. London: Associated University Presses, 1994.
- Gordon, Dillian, Martin Wyld, and Ashok Roy. "Fra Angelico's Predella for the High Altarpiece of San Domenico, Fiesole." *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 23 (2002): 4-19.
- Herrmann, Frank, ed. *The English as Collectors: a Documentary Chrestomathy*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1972.
- Hoch, Adrian S. "The Art of Alessandro Botticelli through the Eyes of Victorian Aesthetes." *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*. Eds. John E. Law and Lene Ostermark-Johansen. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005. 55-85.
- Holmes, Sir Charles, and C.H. Collins Baker. *The Making of the National Gallery, 1824-1924*. London: National Gallery, 1924.
- Jameson, Anna. "The National Gallery." *A Handbook to the Public Galleries of Art in and near London*. London: John Murray, 1842. 2-16.
- Kugler, Franz Theodor. *Handbook of Painting: The Italian Schools*. 4th ed. 2 Vols. Trans. Lady Eastlake. London: John Murray, 1874 and 1884.
- Levi, Donata. "'Let Agents be Sent to all Cities of Italy': British Public Museums and the Italian Art Market in the Mid-Nineteenth Century." *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*. Eds. John E. Law and Lene Ostermark-Johansen. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005. 33-53.
- "The National Gallery." *Times*. 25 Nov. 1856: 12.
- National Gallery, *Art for the Nation: Sir Charles Eastlake at the National Gallery*. www.nationalgallery.org.uk/eastlake. 1 June 2015
- Pemble, John. *The Mediterranean Passion: Victorians and Edwardians in the South*. London: Faber & Faber, 2009.
- Penny, Nicholas, Ashok Roy, and Marika Spring. "Veronese's Paintings in the National Gallery, Technique and Materials: Part 2." *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 17 (1996): 32-55.

- Robertson, David. *Sir Charles Eastlake and the Victorian Art World*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978.
- Rossetti, William Michael. "Sir Charles Lock Eastlake." *Encyclopaedia Britannica: a Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature and General Information*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1911. 835-36.
- Ruskin, John. "Preface." *A Popular Handbook to the National Gallery Including, by Special Permission, Notes Collected from the Works of Mr Ruskin*. London: Macmillan, 1888. vii-ix.
- Ruskin, John. Letter to the Editor. *Times*. 7 Jan. 1847: 5.
- Sheldon, Julie, ed. *The Letters of Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2009.
- Siegel, Jonah. *The Emergence of the Modern Museum: an Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Sources*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008.
- Smith, Charles Eastlake, ed. *Journals and Correspondence of Lady Eastlake*. London: John Murray, 1895.
- Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. London: Duke UP, 1993.
- Taylor, Brandon. *Art for the Nation: Exhibitions and the London Public 1747-2001*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1999.
- Vasari, Giorgio. *The Lives of the Artists*. Trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.
- Whitehead, Christopher. *The Public Art Museum in Nineteenth-Century Britain: the Development of the National Gallery*. London: Ashgate, 2005.

Claire Thomas is a sessional lecturer/supervisor in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. Her PhD focused on the novels of Henry James and George Eliot, and travel to Italy in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Claire's first novel, *Fugitive Blue*, won the Dobbie Prize for Women Writers and was longlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2009. Claire is currently working on two further novels, while her academic interests extend across Victorian studies, contemporary fiction, travel narratives, art history, feminism and the environmental humanities.